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Content analysis of sustainability scholarship in apparel and textiles and its implications for future research

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Sustainability is a rising concern in all facets of society. Scholarly research on sustainability has been carried out in various fields with a common goal of providing a sustainable future for people, prosperity and the planet. Different dimensions of sustainability – social, environmental, and economic have been the topic of research in the field of apparel and textiles (e.g., use of environmental friendly textile materials, use-reuse-recycle, second hand clothing, design innovations to minimize waste, company's socially responsible and ethical practices) (Hethorn & Ulasewiz, 2008). The overall purpose of this study was to examine the types of apparel and textiles research that have been conducted on the topic around sustainability so we could understand the various directions that sustainability related research has taken in this discipline. The results of this study would guide various future research opportunities around this topic in the field.

Content analysis approach was used to analyze one major academic journal, the *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* (CTRJ), in our discipline. This journal was chosen to examine the degree of apparel and textiles research focusing on sustainability throughout different time periods from 1982 to 2012. This study looked for articles of 11 journal issues in a three year gap by using the keywords such as environment, eco-fashion, recycle, second hand, or social responsibility. A pool of 25 keywords/phrases was developed by the investigators based on the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) concepts and apparel and textiles specific literatures. This approach was used to enable the researchers to understand the trends that might have developed the topic around sustainability to apparel and textiles. To ensure the validity of these selected terms, two independent coders were requested to provide their expertise in finalizing the key search terms.

Among the total of 38 CTRJ articles found based on the search keywords/phrases, 25 articles for which the main focus reflected any of the sustainability dimensions were used for the final analysis. The rest of 13 articles not used the search keywords specific in the context of sustainability was excluded for the analysis. It is important to note that (a) some studies were categorized more than once when looking at multiple sustainability dimensions in their study and (b) the editors' notes on special issues on sustainability were not included in the analysis. The title of the study, abstract and keywords were analyzed to categorize articles under the environmental, economic or social dimensions of sustainability. Then the articles were content analyzed using a matrix with environment, social and economic as columns and effect on environment, consumer and industry as rows.

Environmental. Five studies emphasized the effect of fashion consumption and disposal on environment. These studies concentrated on textile waste and environmental protection due to

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dyes and chemicals, environmental analysis and disposal of post-consumer textile waste. Nine studies focused on consumers' environmental concerns and attitudes, their effect on purchase behavior, country of origin and eco-fashion consumption culture. Seven studies examined retailer's marketing claims, green marketing and country of origin from organization perspective. A total of 21 studies had considerable amount of research under this environmental dimension.

Social. Eight studies investigated various aspects regarding consumer perceptions, acceptance and purchase behavior towards sweatshop labor, fair trade apparel, well-being of artisans/workers, ethical ideologies, ethical judgments and socially responsible consumption behavior. The topics of twelve studies were around local communities, U.S. made products, labor practices and trade with developing countries, alternative trading organizations, social and political conditions in the developing countries, fair trade, organizational factors influencing socially responsible apparel buying/sourcing and cause related marketing. A total of 20 studies had considerable amount of research under the social dimension.

Economic. Two studies examined the effect of high price on consumer purchase intentions of sustainable apparel products. Only one study conceptually contributed to the understanding of economic dimension of sustainability in apparel and textiles discipline.

The results of this study show that almost equal amount of research studies have been conducted in terms of the number related to both environment and social dimensions of sustainability. However, the in-depth analysis for the content of articles with respective to the dimensions revealed that in the environmental dimension only five studies were directly related to the impact of apparel and textiles on environment. Consumer studies under this dimension were concentrated more towards consumer behavior and did not measure the direct effect on environment. Furthermore, research scholarship has had an increased emphasis on social dimension from an organizational perspective from time to time. This study proves that there is a gap in the way apparel and textiles scholarship addresses the concept of sustainability through its research endeavors. Additionally, very few studies define the term sustainability or the way their study defines the perspectives of sustainability. It is imperative to address all dimensions of sustainability but concentrating only on social dimension may not communicate a balanced view of sustainability related to the discipline. This study only focused to analyze the articles of 11 CTRJ issues. Further research examining sustainability related articles from different apparel and textiles related journals will certainly strengthen the findings of this study.

References

Hethorn, J., & Ulasewiz, C. (2008). *Sustainable fashion - Why now?* New York: Fairchild Books Inc.